New Fiction in Varied Forms

PIERRE AND LUCE. By Romain Rolland. Henry Holt & Co.

"PIERRE AND LUCE," by Romain Rolland, is announced as a novel but in reality it is a brief prose idyll set in a bitterly tragic background. By way of preface it carries the following quotation:

> Just as the Gulf Stream embraces the Sargasso Sea, into which gradually drift the odds and ends that are carried away by the marine currents into the regions of calm, so does our aerial current surround a region where the air is still. It is called "The Isle of Calms."

In all of his recent works Romain Rolland has been searching through this much troubled work for that Isle of Calms. In the past and in the present he has sought this lost Atlantis, this lucid interspace "Where never creeps a cloud nor moves a wind. Nor ever falls the least white star of snow." In the early years of the great war he sought it in "Above the Conflict." Later he sought it in the early seventeenth century in "Colas Breugnon." The story of that full blooded Burgundian was evidently an attempt on Rolland's part to escape from the constraints and the perplexities of modern life. But his attempt to find delight of living in that far off time and in the person of that robust and robustious artist reminded one of a dyspeptic watching hungrily others at a banquet of which he himself could not partake. He was trying to goad himself into impossible enjoyments, to torture himself for happiness.

In seeking this peace Rolland has lost his own and has become to some the most pathetic and to others the most tragic figure in the literary life of our times. This disappointed grail hunter, who is not yet willing to admit his own disillusionment, is pursuing his quest further in "Pierre and Luce." The younger Dumas had called first love *les lilas de la vie* (the lilacs of life), and it is to these that Rolland has now turned to find that consolation which, alas! seems henceforth destined forever to elude him.

Of story there is almost none; intrigue is entirely lacking, and of characters there are in reality but two. Peirre, a young lad of 18, in January of 1918 has still six months respite before his class is called to the colors. Like Rolland, he is sick of war. He is sick also of the bourgeois ideals of his family, which he sees warping his own life and the lives of those about him. While these colics of revolt are strongest in him and while he is meditating some escape from the rat trap of nationalism in which he finds himself caught, he meets a young girl in the *Metro* during a bombardment by *Gothas*. He clasps her hand in the darkness. This unexpected and unpremeditated contact with life gives him life. Luce, whose father is dead and whose mother is working in the munition factories, gets off at the next station. Pierre rides on. But his new interest allures him and he returns to the quarter where she had alighted and begins a search for her. He finds her shortly thereafter copying pictures in the galleries and painting portraits for bereaved families from photographs of their dead. They come to meet daily, and there develops in the stark and grim last months of the war a story of love set in a frame of tragedy and persecution. In this respect it is not unlike Hugo's Idyll of the Rue Plepus in "Les Miserables," though of course Rolland is a probing psychologist and realist and eschews all rhetoric. It is a sort of Paul and Virginia episode transplanted to Paris, over which war is flapping "from its condor wings invisible woe." The virginal innocence of young nature is thus set in strong contrast to this guilty civilization, and here, of course, we have a subject made to Rolland's later hand.

The lovers decide that they will forget about the war and Pierre's inevitable departure for the front and live to themselves alone. In the pages that follow there are some passages in this lovers' duet that may well be characterized as exquisite, though here and there, where thoughts and not instinct come to the fore, they are the thoughts of middle age, and indeed the thoughts of Romain Rolland's middle age, and not the reflections of a man and a maid in their teens. Through the fog of war in that terrible year spring comes north again, and in the Holy Week, with Pierre's departure looming near, they decide, because of the music, to attend the services at Saint Gervaise. Here they are to die, clasped in each other's arms, when during the ceremony the German long range gun destroys that famous old church on Good Friday of 1918.

Sincere and earnest as the story is, it somehow fails to convince as "Jean Cristophe" convinced. In that masterpiece Rolland was still unembittered by the world's injustice. No one could better understand and few have more convincingly presented childhood and youth than they were there understood and presented. Such is no longer the case. It is true that youth goes toward youth even in war time, but the Rolland of to-day cannot read the tale as the Rolland of "Jean Cristophe" read it when he was still interested in the wonder of life and the world. He has allowed himself to become absorbed now in theories and theses, and somehow his theories and his theses have invaded the otherwise naive souls of these doomed children of a disordered time. As this Hamlet sees it, the world is out of joint and the bourgeois class has sucked out of life its sap and savor. "The dry and wornout earth has little by little imbibed all the juices of life and does not renew them any more, just like those lands of Asia where the fecundating rivers drop by drop have disappeared under the vitreous sand." I have no quarrel with this as a thesis, but I should prefer to be forewarned when I read it and know that I am studying a tract. But whether or not Romain Rolland has gained as a theorist as a result of the persecution that has been visited upon him, he has unfortunately lost ground as a novelist. "The stern and sick Pascal," Goethe has said of an older French moralist. We may now say the same of Romain Rolland.

CHRISTIAN GAUSS.

THE KINGFISHER. By Phyllis Bottome. George H. Doran Company.

SOCIAL barriers are supposed to be particularly erected and guarded by women. It is the woman who decides who is to be called upon and who ignored. Democracy is man's idea and man's work; the thesis that all men are created free and equal is his. That has been at least the popular impression these many years. But to-day, and in England, where caste has been a fetish, it is women who are frankly supporting the democratic conception of life and who see no reason to contradict the man's a man for a' that cry of Burns, even when that man has sprung from the lowest social class. At least this is so in the books by two women that have lately come from the presses; women who hitherto have been content to present such people as are likely to be found only in what is called good society. The first of these books was reviewed lately in these columns, "The Dark House" being the title. The second is this novel of Miss Bottome's, "The Kingfisher."

The two books are alike in their main theme, namely, the forging upward from the dregs of a man who must depend upon his own strength of character to win the heights he achieves. And in each case the man marries a woman of culture and worldly ease, trained in all the delicate perfections of social usages. There the similarity ends, for the men and the lives they lead are different; the incidents and background far apart. But it is a curious coincidence that two English women should turn to such a theme—should, moreover, prove themselves so masterly in developing it, so amazingly adept at picturing the rough conditions of life at the bottom and the conflicts, material as well as spiritual, which their characters must meet.

Heretofore Miss Bottome has written exquisite stories of a finished artistry which were studies of types almost too refined by centuries of inheritance of all that was most civilized and perfected in life. Difficult and poignant problems were met, courage and sacrifice came to meet them; but it was the courage of long breeding, the sacrifice of noblesse oblige. This new book takes for its central character a boy of the slums, who murders his father in a fit of terrified passion when the latter attacks the lad's mother, habitual though these attacks have become. From the dirty room where Jim had lived to the icy ugliness of the penitentiary fate takes him, and there he remains until he is 17. His next step is to a barge, and a bargee he remains for some six months or more, and then he begins the upward climb that takes him to the charming home of a Cambridge coach, to that university, and eventually into the ranks of professional occupation in London, the meeting with Viola, daughter of a rich man and an ultra-exquisite mother, and the marriage of the two, imminent on the last page.

This is the bare outline of a remarkable book, rich in texture and feeling, full of varied individuals, moving easily from the misery and confusion of the slum to the delicate loveliness of perfect interiors and magic gardens.

But Jim is more than a man who makes himself. He is one of those who mean to remake the world. He is a reformer, not a dapper individual from the outside, who looks at what is unsatisfactory and what is evil and what is bitter hard and does a great deal of talking about these things, but one who moves from the inside, from intimate knowledge and deep experience, and who is interested in the facts, not the theories. Jim was as active against the sins of his own people as against those of the capitalist class. He wanted to build character more than to compass hours of ease and plenty of food for his friends. They did not like this. But he was an orator, a man who could speak with fire from the convictions within him, and he was also eminently fair. So they listened to him and even believed in him. Something like Mark in "When Winter Comes," in the fact that he could see both sides of a question, he yet knew what he was after.

For Jim knows the lives of the dock workers and the injustices, the hopeless conditions under which they struggled for the breath of life. Here was a fact, and he set out to see what he could do about it. He spent years in organizing the first strike they had ever had. It failed, but it was a warning to those above and a beacon to those below.

There is more to this book than the mere story of Jim's life. It shows, by means of Jim, what a breath of actual truth can do to wornout institutions and age old traditions. Most persons live by rote. Gradually they come to think that rote is God and right and the world and all that matters. They think this so hard and so successfully that it imposes itself on all about them. Life becomes rote.

But rote did not exist for Jim, and he was able to do without it. A few perceived this, and for them life became something real. Jim made them understand many things and find fresh values for other things. Second hand things showed up for what they were; second rate things took their proper place. Here was an honest man, in every act and thought. As the sun puts out a candle, Jim put out the pinchbeck opinions and insincere convictions that had held rule before he arrived. He is simple, but he is also sensitive, especially for others. And he is keenly alive to beauty. Beauty takes many forms and has strange powers. It is really beauty that Jim is after from the first, beauty for the world as well as for himself. Honesty and cleanliness and straight thought—these are beauty. And so is knowledge and understanding and sympathy and love. Jim's first conscious awakening to beauty was on seeing a kingfisher flash through the air as he strolled along the towing path one dew wet morning in summer while the barge lay at anchor. It stirred in him all that was himself, as distinct from what he was born into. It was beauty—"and beauty stood for the world he did not know—and craved with all the strength of his being to master and to understand."

It is this craving that makes man more than the beasts and that has brought humanity to that point, wherever it stands in the long progression, which it has so far attained.

HILDEGARDE HAWTHORNE.

THE DARK HOUSE. By I. A. R. Wylie. E. P. Dutton & Co.

MISS WYLIE has drawn a powerful portrait in her latest novel, and drawn it well. Robert Stonehouse, from his lonely, harassed and frightened childhood, through the grim years of his growing up, of his study, of his fierce labors toward the achievement of his ambition, to the moment when he finds that he is still lonely and frightened, and that he needs love and understanding even more than success, this Robert is a character four square and living, worth the knowing, and in spite of his defiant refusal of all human sympathy and comradeship, lovable. It was not his fault that he had spent the first ten years of his life in the Dark House—that house domineered over by his father, a man of frantic rages and ungoverned temper, that house where the tradespeople came storming and shouting for their money, where the pawnshop and the bailiff were intimate facts, where the stepmother whined and lied and bullied, and where his only friend was Christine, friend of his dead mother, who did what she could for the child, the father, the miserable house, but who could do very little.

The shadow of this house, of its terrors, its cruelties, its humiliations, make a prison for Robert out of which it is difficult for him to win his way—more particularly since he does not recognize that he is a prisoner. Alone he would never have escaped. But there is Francey—

And Francey is wonderful.

There is a sense of adventure throughout the book. Strange people come into it, each intent on the business of living. There is Cosgrave, with his flaming red head, timid soul, slight body, and mounting spirit. There is Miss Edwards, who is in the chorus, who spends her days amid people who struggle for their daily bread under all sorts of difficult handicaps; there is the grim little figure of Ricardo, humble teacher in a boys' school, but rebel and visionary. Among them all it is Francey who sees, who understands, who leads, yet who is the gentlest and quietest of all. Francey divines well enough that Robert is in prison. . . .

The love story is as unusual as the rest of this clever and passionate book—passionate in that sense of abounding life, of the pressure of events, of thoughts and feelings. The French dancer who plays her part in the lives of several of the characters, a thing of flame, self-seeking and destructive, yet with an odd impersonal interest in the happiness of others, capable of giving something, volatile and yet real; capable of being gay in the face of desperate suffering. Gyp Labelle is one side of the experience of life of which Robert is the other. She first wakes in him a sense of romance, beauty and magic, while he is still a child, and it is she who brings him close to the doorway that leads out of the Dark House into the sunshine. But Francey must open that door, and it is to Francey that he belongs. He wanders far away, but it is only by that long way round which is really the shortest way home. For he must know how many are the steps that lead to love, and take them each one, if he is to leave the Dark House entirely behind him.

Miss Wylie has a sense of color and rhythm, and is delightful reading aside from the story she may have to tell. There is perhaps more of darkness and striving in this story than most readers care for, yet there is an extraordinary quality of delight in the book, too. If Robert is considerably knocked about by life, if we meet, as we go along with him, disappointment, loss, bitterness, yet these are not the end, and they are not the reality. Francey, with her smiling courage, her serenity, her trust and patience and humor, she is the reality.

There is storm here, but there is peace and loveliness, too. Many times tears touch the eyes, for there are poignant pages. But al-

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